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ABSTRACT

The concept of autonomous identity, derived from Piaget's theory of personality, is distinguished from other applications of the term "autonomy" in psychological theory. Introductory comments suggest that both biological and mental development express autonomy in the same two senses: as self-regulating and progressively self-liberating. The next sections focus on various perceptions of the nature of knowledge and moral judgment. The conceptions of autonomy of Erikson, Kohlberg, Loevinger, Peck and Havighurst, and Jung are contrasted with those of Piaget. In the model at issue in this paper, knowledge is perceived as an autonomous activity and autonomous moral choice is deemed to be both possible and desirable. Autonomy is related to intrinsic properties of biological functioning, on one hand, and to identification with universal forms of human experience on the other. The possible integration between the psychology of religious development and that of identity formation is discussed. It is concluded that the autonomous identity reached by separate persons is, in fact, the same identity, and consequently, the only moral distinction between individuals resides in their degree of cognizance of this mutual identity. (AC)

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The Meaning of Autonomy in Psychological Theory

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ABSTRACT

A conception of autonomous identity, derived from Piaget's theory, is sketched and distinguished from other applications of the term autonomy in psychological theory. The present conception relates autonomy to intrinsic properties of biological functioning, on the one hand, and to identification with universal forms of human experience, on the other hand. The conception implies a possible integration between the psychology of religious development and that of identity formation.

The Meaning of Autonomy in Psychological Theory

Philip M. Davidson

The concept of autonomy is important in theories of psychological development, because it is related to the concept of development itself. To illustrate this, we could consider a prototypical example of development such as embryogenesis. Although the embryo naturally needs a supportive environment, the more striking thing is how self-regulated and directed the process is. Self-regulation means that the organism creates itself (i.e., ever more complete versions of itself) as it interacts with its environment. Moreover, the outcome is not merely an expansion in size, but is directed toward qualitative improvements in functioning.

Accordingly, before even taking up specifically psychological issues, we notice at the more general biological level that development entails autonomy in at least two senses: a steady-state notion of autonomy that describes how the process works (autonomous functioning), and an augmentative notion that describes the direction the process is moving toward (increasing autonomy). Because mind emerges from this biological substratum, it is natural to find that mental development also expresses autonomy in the same two senses: as self-regulating, and as progressively self-liberating.

Autonomy as a property of knowledge.

At the psychological level, self-regulation means that knowledge creates itself (more complete versions of itself) as it interacts with

its environment. As sketched in Figure 1, any mental activity, or experience, depends on prior knowledge.

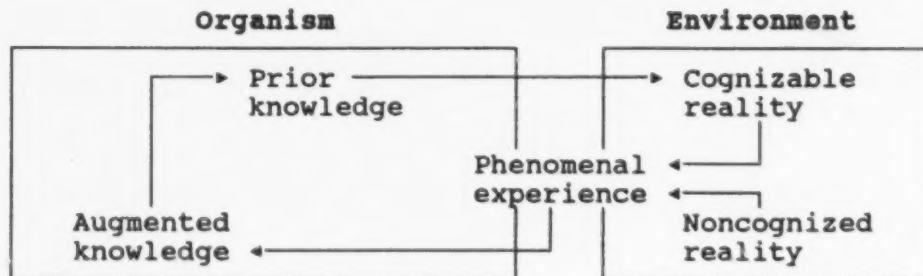


Figure 1.

Logically, the meaning of any new experience must be interpreted from meanings one has previously constructed. Thus, knowledge at a given moment can be traced backward to ever earlier and simpler meanings, until ultimately we find the origin of all meanings in babies' first actions as they begin to make sense of their world (Piaget & Garcia, 1991).

Note that on the present conception knowledge is not separable from development nor from life itself. It expresses both a steady state, in being cyclical and maintaining itself as long as life is present, as well as a direction, in continually expanding the boundaries of cognizable reality. The fact that knowledge is always a self-constructing process also explains why consciousness (i.e., the experience of knowing) is phenomenally continuous and coherent.

Of course, the present conception is contrary to the basic idea of empiricism, according to which experience is determined by the environment. The problem with this commonsense notion is that if knowledge arises by a unidirectional flow of information from the

environment, there could be no explanation of how this information is ever interpreted or given meaning. The mind would thus always be a passive reflection of external reality. The present view is also contrary to the nativist idea that knowledge emerges from a preformed genetic script. The problem with this approach is that it cannot explain the adaptability and creativity of knowledge in the context of ever changing environments.

Both of these two alternative approaches view knowledge as fundamentally predetermined and conditioned—either by external environmental forces or by innate forces. In contrast, the present conception is that knowledge is an autonomous activity, and one that grows out of any living activity. Clearly, then, one's assumptions about the nature of knowledge can constrain whether autonomy is even possible within a theory of psychological development. (A similar point will recur when we go on to consider basic assumptions about the nature of morality.)

Before proceeding, I would like to make an observation about the etymology of "autonomy." Literally, the word means self-governing, and we have seen how well this description fits basic biological and cognitive processes. Its sense is entirely neutral with respect to other governing arrangements; it bears no direct connotation of breaking or separating from another form of control. Yet, in common usage the term is often treated as synonymous with the idea of separation, or setting oneself apart from something. Some scholars have also assumed further that what one separates from, obviously, are other persons. These assumptions are not entailed in the notion of autonomy brought out in the present paper. More specifically, my assumptions are that (a)

the organism does not function except autonomously, although (b) there are different degrees of autonomy and augmented autonomy is developmentally desirable, and (c) augmenting autonomy primarily refers to internal reorganizations of the system into more powerful forms of self-government; implications of this for relationships with external agents is a secondary or derivative matter.

Autonomy as a property of moral judgment.

To generalize somewhat, behavioral science has tried two approaches to understanding moral development. One approach starts with a conceptual analysis of morality. As a practical matter, philosophical analysis is used as a means of identifying what should be studied empirically. Consequently, those who take this approach define morality on a principled basis, one that typically is in line with the rational analyses of Kant and other deontologists such as Hare and Rawls.

This approach generally leads to viewing the substance of morality as nonrelative, and defining true moral judgment in terms of autonomy of will or autonomous rationality. The criterion of autonomous rationality sets the substance of morality apart from other possible grounds for making social judgments—such as conventionality, conformity, empathy, indoctrination, conditioning, or sentiment. These might be reasonable ways of making other kinds of social judgments, but in principle they are ruled out as adequate grounds for moral judgment. Instead, moral judgment is understood to involve a search for ideals or principles that transcend the prevailing norms or conventions under which people happen to be raised (Kohlberg, 1984; Turiel, 1983).

On the other hand, some theorists aim to take a more empirical approach to identifying the substance of morality by defining morality with reference to existing group norms. Naturally, cultural norms vary from group to group, so this second approach entails an assumption of relativism. Further, since morality is defined in an ad hoc way based on particularistic practices, the only basis for proper moral judgment comes down to some form of conventionality or conformity to group expectations. Therefore, there is little room for autonomy of judgment in a purely empirically-driven theory of moral development. In fact, to the extent that any real autonomy could be described in the context of social determinism, it might well be viewed as deviant and therefore of negative "moral" worth. Variations on the idea that morality is basically adjustment or conformity have been held by numerous prominent theorists, including Durkheim (1902), Freud (1930), and Bandura (1986).

There are some natural compatibilities between one's assumptions about human knowledge, as mentioned in the preceding section, and one's assumptions about morality, as mentioned in the present section. The idea that knowledge is self-regulating, or intrinsically autonomous in a biological sense, is naturally compatible with the view that autonomous moral choice is possible and desirable. On the other hand, the idea that knowledge is predetermined by nonrational forces is naturally compatible with the view that morality is essentially an adjustment to existing exigencies or practices.

Before moving on, it is interesting to note that the idea of autonomy has been considered, at least since Kant, to be such a compelling hallmark of mature human cognition that even the most deterministic theories attempt to encompass it. Thus, for Durkheim

(1902), the fundamental elements of morality are respect for authority and subordination of the individual to the group. Yet, from this theoretical foundation, Durkheim attempts to explain the emergence of autonomy or self-determination, which he admits is the most advanced or adequate moral standpoint. Similarly, Mead (1934; pp. 379-389) forcefully endorses autonomous moral judgment, even though his epistemology reduces all thought, including moral judgment, to an internalization of other persons' pre-existing viewpoints.

Within a deterministic context, it seems to me, the only possible conception of autonomy is that of persons playing the role of autonomous agents. Such theories explain autonomy by positing a socialization process which is so effective that persons end up adopting the attitudes and values of social control agents, not out of overt coercion but by "choice". Logically, this has to include an element of self-delusion (although these theories omit mentioning it), because people would not experience their choices and their role enactments as free and autonomous unless they also repress the fact that these are just effects of being socialized or manipulated.

Uses of "autonomy" in psychological theory.

I turn now to the uses of "autonomy" in psychological theories to describe specific developmental achievements. The term has been applied in the areas of moral development and personality development, and has been used in quite different senses by different theorists. As noted above, some theorists tend to suppose a primary meaning of autonomy as liberation from another form of control. Thus, it is sometimes helpful

to ask, "autonomy from what?" Relative to what other form of control does the theorist elect to define autonomy?

Erikson's (1963, 1980) theory of personality development posits eight stages across the life span. Erikson uses the term autonomy to label one of these stages—the second one, pertaining to the second year of life. Here the term characterizes the young child's first establishment of an identity separate from others, the first accomplishments in self-control (such as controlling the bowel, and feeding oneself), and the emergence of self-assertion or insisting on having one's way. If we ask, "autonomy from what," the answer is "autonomy from physiological dependence and ego diffusion." This is just the beginning of a long process of ego individuation that is elaborated further throughout the lifespan, especially during the identity crisis of adolescence. Erikson marks the first step of this process, at a period of relative immaturity, with the label autonomy.

Others choose instead to mark the mature product of the individuation process with this label. Thus, Kohlberg (1984) identifies autonomy with the post-conventional reasoning found at the highest level of moral development. Autonomy means freedom from conformity and from nonreflective, habitual patterns of thought, such as dominate the preceding stage with its emphasis on maintaining law and order. To think autonomously is to operate from a realm of possibility rather than being tied to existing social arrangements. A similar conception is found in Loevinger's (1977) theory, which also applies autonomy to a stage that is usually achieved only during adulthood. The primary meaning of autonomy for Loevinger is "freeing of the person from the oppressive demands of conscience" (1977, p. 23). By this stage,

personal identity is stable within itself and free from the need for social approval.

We note in both Kohlberg and Loevinger's views the implication that achieving autonomy involves elevating the rational and dispassionate component of the self over and above other components. In more psychoanalytic terminology, this idea has been expressed well by Peck and Havighurst (1960): "Autonomy is defined as the operation of an independent, rational ego, which organizes and channels both id and superego directives without being dominated by them" (p. 222). The conception of autonomy as primarily an internal process of mental reorganization is stated as follows by Jung (1971): "The aim of individuation is nothing less than to divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona on the one hand, and of the suggestive power of primordial images on the other" (p. 123).

Piaget's conception of autonomy.

Piaget's (1932, 1933/1977, 1954/1981) theory identifies autonomy as a stage of morality and, correspondingly, as a stage of personality. His most conspicuous use of autonomy is in contrast with heteronomy, and on a superficial reading the contrast is between a condition of submitting to others' norms and that of rationally generating one's own norms. However, Piaget's analysis of autonomy is much deeper than this. As for Jung and other theorists, the meaning of autonomy is not a separation between self and other persons, but between parts of the self:

Cooperation is really a factor in the creation of personality, if by personality we mean, not the unconscious self of childish

egocentrism, nor the anarchical self of egoism, but the self that takes up its stand on the norms of reciprocity and objective discussion, and knows how to submit to these in order to make itself respected. Personality is thus the opposite of the ego... (1932, p. 95).

The personality is not identical with the self, and one could even say that is oriented in the opposite direction. In effect, the self is activity that is centered on the self. The personality, on the other hand, develops at the time of entry into social life. Consequently, it presupposes decentration and subordination of the self to the collective ideal (1954/1981, p. 71).

For clarity, I shall refer to what Piaget calls "personality" as the autonomous identity. Of the theorists cited, Piaget is the only one who explicitly describes the development of autonomy as transcending the ego. If we are accustomed to thinking of the ego as coextensive with rationality or with socialized thought, then Piaget's theoretical manoeuvre must appear paradoxical. To make this idea more compelling, consider that the ego also entails that sense of ownership individuals naturally have over their own experience. The ego is identification with, and a sense of continuity across, one's unique life history. Regardless of the level of rationality attained, the ego identity necessarily confers a particular point of view in any social interaction, a point of view that is intrinsically self-interested and self-protective (Davidson & Yoniss, 1991).

Numerous scholars, notably Kohlberg and his followers, try to steer a course for the ego out of its self-interested condition to a more

enlightened standpoint, by arguing that higher levels of development entail a subordination of the ego to universal norms of rationality and morality. This argument is plausible insofar as it explains the possibility of nonegoistic principled moral inferences; however, it does not account for the development of a nonegoistic mode of being. Thus, it might explain how people achieve principled moral thought, but not why they are moral. In short, an explanation based on rationality alone cannot account for the development of an autonomous identity.

In contrast, on Piaget's interpretation, the development of an autonomous identity is the primary phenomenon underlying both principled morality and objective rationality. The autonomous identity is a cognitive standpoint radically distinct from that of the ego, one that is intrinsically neutral with respect to the ego's position as compared with other persons'. From this standpoint, nonegoistic judgments and actions flow naturally; they do not need to be deliberately deduced and carried out by a conflicted ego. Moreover, Piaget's conception of autonomy as liberation from the ego avoids the problematic implication, as arises in some other theories, that autonomous development entails a progressive separation of the individual from social influence. Instead, development involves continued integration and coordination within the social realm, as emphasized in the above quotations.

Implications for rapprochement between the psychologies of identity formation and religious development.

My concluding thought is perhaps more of an extension than a direct interpretation of Piaget's conception. Notice that Piaget's analysis can be read as defining ego as personal identity insofar as it is

particular, while autonomy is defined as personal identity insofar as it is universal. That is, the source of ego is identification with the episodic, particularistic contents of experience; whereas, the source of autonomous identity is identification with the general forms of these interactions, forms that are universal in the development of all persons. (Piaget's term for the universal aspect of cognition is "epistemic subject;" his term for cognizing the form rather than the content of experience is "reflective abstraction.")

The implication, then, is that the autonomous identity developed by separate persons is, in fact, the same identity. Consequently, the only moral distinction between individuals consists in their degree of cognizance of this mutual identity. This conceptual analysis gives a fairly concrete significance to certain aspects of religious thought, such as the exhortation to identify the self with others, and thus it may point to new avenues for empirical research into religious development.

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